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AUTHOR Steiner, Stuart
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ABSTRACT

A description is provided of the self-study program review process developed by Genesee Community College (GCC) as an alternative to the traditional Middle States evaluation process. First, the paper examines the history of self-study at GCC from 1980, when a committee was created to coordinate a study of the college which would fulfill accreditation and state reporting requirements; include widespread participation by the college faculty and staff; complement GCC's long-range planning process and strengthen its research capability; encourage interaction within the college community; and promote professional development. Next, the roles and responsibilities of the Self-Study Steering Committee and self-study writers are delineated, and incentives for the participation of faculty members are noted. After listing the topics addressed in program self-studies (e.g., program history, goals, effectiveness measures, cohesiveness, and plans), the paper addresses the improving qualities of the program self-study reports, the importance of information sharing within the internal committee structure, and the dissemination of self-study findings. Finally, the benefits and limitations of GCC's review process are outlined. (HB)

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GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SELF-STUDY AND EVALUATION

Dr. Stuart Steiner
President
Genesee Community College

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GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SELF-STUDY AND EVALUATION

Genesee Community College has adopted an on-going self-study program review process that will result in all academic programs and support service areas being reviewed over a five-year time period. It is an exciting and rewarding process that focuses on programs and services and not on individuals.

It is also a process that yields significant personal and institutional benefits, but at a potential cost -- both fiscally and, possibly, psychologically -- especially for Presidents and Deans. It is a process that I would recommend only for an institution that feels relatively good about itself and for colleges where the chief administrators have a general confidence in themselves and in their staffs.

The process I will describe has now been approved as a legitimate alternative to the traditional Middle States Evaluation Process.

I have always believed in the value and helpfulness that Middle States visits provide to institutions. I also know that the very best and hardest working teams can only get a superficial look at an institution and its programs during a typical visit.

Good teams will indeed be able to identify an institution that is

having major problems. However, no matter how hard a team works, when

the team leaves there are frequently complaints by numbers of faculty or staff that no one came to talk to them about their programs. Such a process does little to meet individuals' needs or to win their confidence.

We adopted our review process with a view toward what Genesee needed and wanted in return for our investment in time and resources.

Planning for a comprehensive on-going self-study and evaluation process got underway at G.C.C. in August of 1980, when a committee was established and charged to develop proposals for coordinating a study of the College which would satisfy several considerations, including:

first: to complement the standards and procedures suggested for institutional self-study by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools;

second: to include widespread participation by members of the College faculty and staff;

third: to meet requirements for the periodic review of registered programs established by the State University of New York;

fourth: to prepare the College for its reaffirmation of accreditation by Middle States during the 1985-1986 academic year;

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fifth: to meet requirements for the Middle States Periodic Review Report, and

sixth: to complement the College's long-range planning process.

In addition to the original goals, several secondary goals are served by the self-study process:

first: to expand the College's institutional research capability and sophistication;

second: to gather current and historical information about each of the College's programs and administrative service areas;

third: to promote interaction between and among different College constituent groups, especially between faculty who teach in career programs and those who teach in transfer programs, and between faculty and professional staff;

fourth: to promote the professional development of faculty and staff members; and

fifth: to increase our shared understanding of our history and our future direction.

Because the process that has evolved is an all-College effort, including registered programs and administrative service areas that report to all the deans of the College and to the President, and because

this effort is now being done in cooperation with the Middle States Association and the New York State Education Department, responsibility for coordinating the process is assigned within the President's Office.

Self-study writers in registered academic programs are faculty members, and a number of factors have served to develop faculty support for this self-assessment process. First, the Self-Study Steering Committee, which was charged with the development of the process, was chaired by the Dean of the College, and its members represented a wide range of faculty and staff interests. The idea of academic program evaluation was not new to the College; it was accepted as a professional obligation. The extension of the obligation to administrative service offices on the same terms as those undertaken by the faculty was new. It was accepted as fair by the entire committee, and faculty did not see themselves as singled out for additional scrutiny while administrative offices went unevaluated.

It was also the Steering Committee that developed the comprehensive "Outline for Program/Service Self-Study" which provides direction to individual study writers. The Committee also developed the 5-year schedule for self studies so that all programs and offices had advance warning of when their time would come. For most, there would be a great

deal of time to prepare.

Other incentives were provided for faculty and staff to adopt this self-study process. The self-study format offered free reign to propose changes in programs or to argue for increased support. The College encourages this openness, despite the risks involved. If self-study writers can convince the external evaluators that changes should be made and/or that additional support is needed, then the College promises to give serious consideration to those proposals. These reports are not censored ahead of time, and frequently people use them to air pet peeves and, sometimes, to bring attention to small problems that can be easily corrected.

Self-study writers are assisted by committees of their own choosing. These committees must include a member of the Steering Committee, who serves in a liaison capacity, and a ruthless editor. Requiring the creation of a committee is one way to assure that self-study writers will have lots of support from their colleagues and from the Steering Committee as well. Individual self-study coordinators are identified a year in advance so they can serve on the Steering Committee, help with one of the self-study committees and receive some preparation before undertaking their own project.

Additionally, faculty are provided a $600 stipend for work performed the summer before their self-study reports are due. The summer should provide enough time to complete any research that is needed, gather all relevant data, and produce a first rough draft of the report. (12-month administrators do not receive additional compensation for their work because they are expected to schedule their work to allow time to complete the project. They may negotiate reduced responsibility for a period of time if needed. This is not a popular omission among administrators who see self-study as just as much an additional burden on them as it is on the faculty.)

The final incentive is the individual attention each program or service area will receive from a Middle States evaluator who is an expert in the particular program being reviewed. This individual attention isn't possible in the context of a traditional Middle States visit, and it serves as an incentive to do a good job. There is also great personal satisfaction in seeing your own report in print, and sharing it with your professional colleagues.

The self-studies themselves are major undertakings. Coordinators are identified a year in advance so they can become familiar with the process and begin, if they choose, to organize their work. Each self-

study is unique because the issues in each program or service area are likely to be different. Each coordinator is encouraged to take the "Outline for Program/Service Self-Study" and make it his or her own, deleting sections that are irrelevant and adding questions to address real concerns. The general topics that each study is asked to address are these:

Program History and Description
Goals and Objectives of the Program
Program Effectiveness Measures
Program/Student Interaction
Student Enrollment and Retention
Sufficiency of Program Support
Use of Instructional Support Services
Community Relations
Program Cohesiveness
Program Plans for the next 5 Years

A great deal of information is needed in order to adequately answer the questions raised in each section of the Outline, and the self study coordinators are learning to call upon the Director of Institutional Research early in the process. He will help design, administer and analyze survey material as requested, and he is able to provide more and better student data each year. But much digging still has to be done in departmental files and College archives, and in the memories of those who have been at G.C.C. since the beginning.

Not surprisingly, with better data and increasing experience, the quality of the reports seems to improve each year. One senses that there is greater cooperation and better use of the individual committees each year, as well as greater involvement on the part of our first-line administrators, the associate deans. The studies are becoming more individual and more analytical, and the level of candor remains very high.

Because of the internal committee structure that has been developed, the College has not made external consultants available for the preparation of the self studies. Study writers have been willing to ask their colleagues and their associate deans for the assistance they need. The only external consultants are the Middle States reviewers who come after the reports are published to review their findings and recommendations. These reviewers serve as consultants to the programs under review, and they are encouraged to meet and talk with each program's faculty, staff and students, and also with the members of the College administration, in order to develop as broad and as accurate a picture of the college as possible. I might add that all information is shared with the State Education Department and a representative of the Department is invited to join the Program visits each year. Like the traditional

Middle States visit, the team presents its findings in an oral exit interview to the College before they leave campus, and then a written report is prepared by the team Chairman (the Chief Program Evaluator.) The College responds in writing to that report, and both documents become part of the record which will be analyzed and reviewed for reaccreditation by Middle States at the end of the 5-year self-assessment cycle. This review will be completed by a 2 or 3 person Middle States "audit" team. These documents are also shared with the College community; copies are distributed to all academic divisions and to the Library. The Board of Trustees and the State Education Department are also provided with copies of all self-studies, review team findings, and the College response.

This self-assessment process is demanding and expensive, and like everything else, it has its advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the system more than meets the goals established for it in the Steering Committee's original charge, particularly now that Middle States Association and the New York State Education Department have accepted the process as one which will meet their requirements for accreditation and program review. The State Education Department informed us that quite frankly, our process was closer to what they would like to see for program

registration purposes than the more traditional process. The development and publication of base data in the program and administrative service areas, and the individual assessment of present and future program needs, have already given great impetus to planning activities in all parts of the College. People are learning to think about the College's future and to plan their place in it. For example, I was delighted to see in our physical plant self study a statement of goals and objectives for the physical plant staff (including custodians and maintenance staff) and an assessment of their effectiveness. Sections on their impact on students, their support of the academic programs, and their impact on community/College relations are included in this most comprehensive study and review of physical facilities that I have seen anywhere. The value of this group of sometimes "invisible" people working to clearly define themselves as an important part of the College operation cannot be overestimated.

The external review process has sometimes identified common themes or needs shared by more than one of the programs or offices under review. Last year's reviewers identified the need for coordinated planning, particularly in the recruitment of students and preparation of College publications and brochures. A task force is now addressing this broad

area of effective marketing techniques, with the assistance of an experienced consultant. The task force will address and hopefully resolve issues raised in several different self study reports, each of which has identified one part of a larger problem.

The review process isn't perfect, as each year's Steering Committee and each year's study writers remind us. Self study requires a tremendous amount of work, and the resulting studies are not of equal quality. There is a great deal of unavailable historical data, particularly for the years before our student data was computerized. Some people are better prepared by aptitude and training to undertake these projects than others. Planning beyond one year does not come naturally to most people; it needs to be taught and encouraged and this process is continual. As a matter of fact, the idea of putting down on paper planning ideas and goals for a year or more is something that many people resist as strongly as possible. Each self-study report is a planning document, and the plans which are developed as part of each report need response from the College administration and from the external reviewers; of course, they also need to be followed up and revised on a regular basis so that plans are seen to result in changes and improvements. One problem with the external review

component has been the uniqueness of this self-study approach, which none-the-less looks a great deal like the Middle States approach that everyone is familiar with. Experienced external reviewers have sometimes treated our self-studies like the administration documents with which they are familiar. But these studies are not administration documents in any sense, nor are the views of deans or the President necessarily reflected in them. Unlike the typical Regional Accreditation documents that were generally "edited" by a Dean or a member of the President's staff, or a faculty member working for the Dean or President on a year's released time basis, these documents go forth with the views of the faculty -- even in cases where there is a clear disagreement in the interpretation of facts or conclusions that one draws. The growing knowledge of the independent nature of the review process has helped to create broad interest in the process. It has also yielded an abundance of insight and information to the administrative staff regarding faculty/staff perceptions of some problems which they may not have been previously aware of.

This model for self-assessment is one that provides room for individual expression and mechanisms for overall change and improvement as desirable modifications are identified. The Steering Committee has just completed a

revision of the Outline for Program/Service Self-Study to make it easier to use. A major change in the system has been the undertaking of faculty self-study projects during the summer months. Faculty have been able to get most of the basic work done during the summer, and have then used the fall semester to share their drafts with their committees, get critical feedback, and complete final writing and editing. Informal evaluation of the entire process goes on continually and its results are reflected in the changes just described.

Formal evaluation of the process and its results will await the coming of the Middle States reaccreditation visit in 1985-86. In that year, self-study will enter phase 2, as the programs that piloted this new process in 1980-81 undertake a five-year periodic review. This process has not yet been designed. Certainly it will include a report of changes which have taken place since the last self-study, of progress toward the completion of planned objectives, and the development of a new five-year plan.

This model for self-assessment is one that can be easily modified to meet the needs of a number of colleges, but there are some serious questions to be considered before the step is taken. How much energy is there among faculty and administrators to sustain this almost constant

review process? How much "risk" are Presidents willing to take in terms of having to handle new recommendations each year from external consultants? How much support can the College provide in terms of institutional research? How much money is available for faculty stipends and the annual visits of external evaluators? How willing are you to be evaluated by your accrediting association, and perhaps your state coordinating board, every year? This is not an easy or an inexpensive alternative to traditional evaluation procedures. But it does provide institutional benefits far beyond those derived from less frequent, less intense processes. For G.C.C., the benefits have far outweighted the costs. The organization and historical information being developed for each of the academic and support services will yield long term and long lasting benefits. The opportunity to provide a legitimate outlet for faculty and staff to air their concerns and to have an external consultant review large and small problems -- whether real or imagined -- can do a great deal for faculty and staff morale. The on-going involvement of a significant number of professional staff members in the process, whether as the author of a study or as a "ruthless editor" or a committee member, is invaluable as people learn about other disciplines and areas through this process. The contribution of this process to an on-going

planning process is critical; it is difficult to sustain a significant on-going faculty/staff interest in that process. The on-going "quality control" information that self study provides to the President and Board is another bonus, and the fact that the process can be modified to meet the on-going needs and concerns of specialized accreditation agencies, the regional accrediting agency and your state education department is a benefit that should not be underestimated.

For the faculty and staff the opportunity to be self-expressive -- reflected in the individualism of the covers each designed for his or her own self-study -- and the opportunity to be in the spotlight for a year that concludes with a dinner where they sit with a Middle States Reviewer, a Trustee and some other committee members discussing their program -- is something that several faculty members have told me was a major "indirect benefit" from the process.

I do not believe that this on-going Program Assessment process is for every college -- but I strongly believe that it is a process worthwhile examining and that, at the very least, many colleges will find elements of the process that will be useful to them.

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